During one of my night-time finger-wading map searches of general geopolitical knowledge, I came across the name Salud Algabre. I have never heard of this female revolutionary from the Philippines. The hour is late, so I leave Algabre for tomorrow’s googling and I quickly search Wikipedia to get a closer look at the political and social developments in the Philippines. I come across quite surprising information about a Czech friend of the Filipino national hero José Rizal. His name was Ferdinand Blumentritt.

The next day, I read a text by Jindřich Tomas, a historian who has long been involved with Blumentritt. I find that Ferdinand Blumentritt was a high school teacher living in Litoměřice and also a well-known filipinologist who played an important role in the history of Filipino liberation struggles. In the Czech context, his name is not well known. At the same time, I was intrigued that the man hadn’t left Central Europe in his entire life.

Nowadays, it is often discussed that interest in post-colonial thinking in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is still in early stages of development. Therefore, it is not surprising that important actors of anti-colonial history remain neglected. But Ferdinand Blumentritt is undoubtedly one of the most interesting personalities of the 19th century. Known for his open stances against anti-Semitism of the era, he was a keen supporter of a number of Filipino fighters against the colonial rule of Spain and, subsequently, the United States.
In addition to Blumentritt’s closest friend, José Rizal, Isabel de los Reyes – one of the great characters of the liberation history of the Philippines and the author of the famous folklore works written “from the viewpoint of the other side” – must also be mentioned.² But, in this paper, I am going to look at the relationship between Blumentritt and Rizal because their correspondence is so voluminous that one could say without exaggeration that, apart from their thoughts, it contains a detailed description of all social events in the Philippines at that time. An important moment that captivated me with Rizal is his authorship of the historically first novel written from the position of the colonized and critical of colonial practices. All these findings led me to visit the modest Blumentritt and Rizal Museum in Litoměřice, dedicated to the Philippines and the friendship of the two men. The museum, several articles, books and documents helped me shed some light on the story, which I will outline here.

How Ferdinand Blumentritt and José Rizal met

Ferdinand Blumentritt was born in Prague in 1853 and lived all his life in Litoměřice, where he taught history and geography at secondary schools, later becoming the director of the Litoměřice grammar school. He was interested in the history of Latin America and the Philippines all his life, spoke several European languages and was active in publishing, contributing to numerous geographical and ethnographic magazines around the world. He gathered a specialized library of 900 volumes, a collection of scholarly documents on Philippines and, since the 1870s, has been in constant correspondence with ethnographers and geographers in Germany, Spain and the Philippines.

Blumentritt’s first work that attracted broader attention dealt with the general system of governance of the Philippine indigenous population under the Spanish rule. Similar interest in the social situation in a country so far away was a rare phenomenon at the time. At that time, Blumentritt also worked on a dictionary of Spanish terms proper to the Philippines, but he probably never heard the language for real.³ After the original population of Mindanao rose, Blumentritt published an article based on the explanations and rhetoric of the colonizers and its spokesmen. He commented skeptically on the rebellion and described the indigenous Moros (i.e. Muslim tribes) in the spirit of European missionaries.

He received an unexpected answer from doctor José Rizal, in a German letter in which he pointed out to Blumentritt that his knowledge of the Philippines came from books written by monks, Spaniards and their friends: “You write it upside down! If you were born and raised like me in the middle of our villages, and heard what our peasants believe, say, think and suffer, then you would surely think otherwise of Catholicism in the Philippines...” Rizal pessimistically assumed Blumentritt to act as others who “write according to their favored assumptions and comfort,”⁴ but it was not the case. Blumentritt immediately wrote to Rizal and the connection lasted until Rizal’s death in front of a firing squad.

José Rizal was born in 1861 in Calamba on the island of Luzon, in an area inhabited by the Tagala tribe. Rizal’s family belonged to the country’s small bourgeoisie; his father was a tenant of land owned by a Dominican monastery with whom he was in constant dispute.

Rizal studied medicine at the University of Manila, graduated in Madrid, and in 1885 completed his studies of philosophy. Among other things, he had literary ambitions, devoted himself to fine arts, mastered several Asian and European languages, he was interested in zoology, ethnography, history, education issues.

² Or by the colonized. El Folk-Lore Filipino (1889) is one of the most famous ethnographic works of Isabel de los Reyes. Ferdinand Blumentritt translated the first three chapters of this publication into German.
³ The term “armchair anthropologist” is used for similar scientific practices of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This term defines an anthropologist who circumvented consistent scientific procedures (e.g. field research), based his/her judgments on the testimonies and experiences of colonizers/missionaries, often using his/her own imagination. Similar practices have led to problematic conclusions encouraging reasoning in racist stereotyped categories.
(theoretically and practically), engineering and agriculture. In 1885 Rizal wrote his first novel, *Noli me tangere* (Touch me not). As I mentioned earlier, this novel was one of the first criticism of colonialism written from the standpoint of the colonized and it was translated into several world languages.

The very first European anti-colonial novel was *Max Havelaar* by the Dutch author Eduard Douwes Dekker (better known by his pen name *Multatuli*), published in 1860. Rizal read the aforementioned novel and wrote to Blumentritt: “Multatuli’s book, which I will send you as soon as I can obtain a copy, is extraordinarily exciting. Without a doubt, it is far superior to my own. Still, because the author is himself a Dutchman, his attacks are not as powerful as mine. Yet the book is much more artistic, far more elegant than my own, although it only exposes one aspect of Dutch life on Java.”

The situation in the Philippines is getting worse

*Noli me Tangere*, the book boldly criticizing clerical feudal order in the Philippines, was published in Berlin and met with great acclaim. It caught the attention of the Spanish-Filipino bourgeois opposition in Barcelona and Madrid, aroused the interest of emigrants in Paris and London, but also met with hateful reactions of the colonial regime, for which Rizal himself and his family also paid a price later on. The novel was a breakthrough act for the Philippines and Rizal became the announcer of the revolution. When he returned home from his studies in Europe, he stopped off in Litoměřice, where he spent several days. He gave one copy of the novel to his friend Blumentritt, who attempted to translate it into German shortly afterwards. After Rizal’s return to the Philippines, negative reactions to his novel escalated, while anonymous letters and newspaper articles threatened death to the “German agent”, a “heretic” raging against the Catholic Church and wishing to break ties with the “mother country.” For these reasons Rizal soon left for London via Hong Kong, Japan and the United States.

While writing the novel, Rizal, like most of his companions, made a clear distinction between the Spanish government and the religious orders present in the Philippines. But following several events that came just after the publication
of the novel, he began to radicalize politically. His attitude was changed mainly by mass evictions, arrests and deportations of the local population (including his family members) in Calamba, but also by demonstrations in 1888, when the governor of Manila received a public petition requesting the expulsion of the bishops from the Philippines. Historically, this petition, fueled by Rizal’s novel, is considered the first civic response.\(^6\) The fact that the Madrid Senate declared the petition subversive and had the signatories arrested affected Rizal, who wrote an indignant letter to Blumentritt from London on June 23, 1888: “I believe that it is already late; the majority of the Filipinos have already lost the hope they have pinned on Spain! Now, we await our fate from God and from ourselves, but never any more from any Government!”\(^7\)

At that time, Blumentritt was already very active in commenting on the political situation in the Philippines, which he consistently discussed in various magazines. For example, he has worked with La Solidaridad,\(^8\) where in his contributions he defended criticism of Spanish philippinologists and, above all, defended Rizal and his so-called filibusterism.\(^9\) Blumentritt’s articles provoked a fierce response in Manila, as was the case with his text on history and geography at some European schools, which indirectly and overwhelmingly criticized the Spanish and Philippine school systems. It caused a wave of outrage and insults to which he responded, inter alia, by giving up honorary membership in the various societies he had previously earned.

In his preface to the book on the history of discoveries in the Philippines, published as Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas written by Antonio de Morga in Mexico in the 17\(^{th}\) century. Rizal newly published the book with a preface by Blumentritt.

\(^8\) La Solidaridad was an organization founded in 1888 by Filipino exiles who studied in Europe and later published their own magazine of the same name.
\(^9\) Filibustero, originally a Spanish term for “pirate” in the 16\(^{th}\) century, was later used to refer to those involved in rebel nationalist battles in Latin America, the Caribbean, and other Spanish colonies.
\(^10\) The book is Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas written by Antonio de Morga in Mexico in the 17\(^{th}\) century. Rizal newly published the book with a preface by Blumentritt.
powerful and admirable moment. The whole edition of this book was confiscated in the Philippines and one copy, which is now part of the estate of Ferdinand Blumentritt in České Budějovice, is extremely rare. In this specimen, Rizal wrote a dedication to Blumentritt: “To the greatest defender of the rights of the Filipinos. His friend and brother.”12 This book is presented by Blumentritt’s words: “It is easy to assume that a filibuster has bewitched in secret the league of friars and reactionaries, so that following unconsciously his inspirations they would favor and promote that policy which only aspires to one aim: to spread the ideas of subversion throughout the entire country and to convince the last Filipino that no other salvation exists outside of separation from the Motherland.”13

Rizal returns to the Philippines

In late September 1891, Rizal wrote to Blumentritt that he must return to the Philippines. “Life becomes a burden, I must set an example, I must not fear death... I’m going to meet my destiny. If I die, you will remain. But for me, life in Europe is impossible. Better to die than to live miserably!”14 After returning to the Philippines, Rizal was greeted by Tagalese bourgeoisie and intelligence for his proclaimed nonviolent “assimilation”, while the wider popular strata of towns and villages saw in Rizal primarily the intrepid “filibuster” proclaiming the inevitable struggle with the Spaniards.15

Interestingly, Rizal and his collaborators developed a strategy that outwardly presented rather moderate reformist attitudes, but in fact they were much more radical. Thus, they pursued a “double” strategy of reform and separatism.16 In a letter dated January 30, 1892, Blumentritt warned Rizal: “Above all, I beg you not to get involved in revolutionary agitation! For he who stages a revolution should at the least have before him the likelihood of success, if he does not wish to have his conscience burdened with useless bloodshed. Whenever a people has rebelled against another people dominating it, [or] a colony against the Motherland, the revolution has never succeeded solely on the basis of its own strength. The American Union became free because France, Spain and the Netherlands allied with it. The Spanish republics became free because civil war raged in the Motherland, and England and North America provided...
money and guns. The Greeks became free because England, France and Russia offered their support. The Rumanians, Serbs and Bulgarians were liberated by Russia. The Italians were liberated thanks to France and Prussia, and the Belgians thanks to England and France. Everywhere, those peoples who relied solely on their own strength were crushed by the soldiery of Legitimacy: the Italians in 1830, 1848, and 1849; the Poles in 1831, 1845, and 1863, the Hungarians in 1848 and 1849, and the Cretans in 1868.”  

17 Blumentritt further argued strategically that the revolution would stand a chance of success only if “(1) the enemy army and navy were part of the rebellion, (2) the homeland were at war with another nation (3) money and weapons were well prepared in advance, (4) and if a foreign power officially or secretly supported the uprising.” To which Blumentritt noted “none of these conditions [today] has been met in the Philippines.

In 1892 Rizal founded the Liga Filipina, but before the Liga was able to build a network of branches, Rizal was arrested and expelled to Dapitan, on the north coast of Mindanao. On the same day (July 7, 1892), when his expulsion was published, another political organization was established in the suburbs of Manila – the secret society Katipunan (Association of the Sons of the People). Andrés Bonifacio, a member of the Liga Filipina, was the driving force behind it. Katipunan was more successful than the Liga in terms of the number of members and the scale of the branch network, and they even published the secret magazine Kalayaan (Freedom) in Manila. The Katipunan program followed the Liga, but was more radical. It proclaimed the necessity of separating the Philippines from Spain in a revolutionary way.

At a time when there was a real armed uprising in the Philippines, Blumentritt published a series of optimistic articles on the alleged power of Filipino separatists in Espanola en Filipinas. After armed clashes with the police, revolutionary forces headed by Andrés Bonifacio and other Rizal’s “pupil” Emilia Aguinald occupied the central part of Luzon and the province of Cavite. Spain subsequently sent military reinforcements to suppress the rebellion. José Rizal was brought before a military court and was sentenced in a show trial to death for participating in the organization of the rebellion. On the morning of December 30, 1896, he was publicly executed on Manila’s Luneta promenade by a bullet.
The night before his execution, Rizal wrote two letters, one to his mother and the other to Blumentritt, assuring him that “I am not to blame for the uprising and I die with a clear conscience.”18 Blumentritt did not have enough information after Rizal’s death and he was unable to follow the rapid development of the events in the Philippines. At the same time, his other acquaintances are dying in the Philippines and Madrid, and Blumentritt began publishing under a pseudonym. In the meantime, the Philippine rebellion has outgrown its initial phase, the need arose to reorganize the Katipunan, resulting in an internal struggle in the revolutionary camp, during which Andrés Bonifacio was executed.

On November 1, 1897, the Constitution was proclaimed declaring the independence of the Philippines based on bourgeois democratic freedoms. People’s demands were no longer the topic. The year after the destruction of the Spanish fleet by the US fleet in the Bay of Manila, independence of the Philippines was declared again – this time by the Americans – and after signing the so-called Paris Peace, The United States bought the Philippines from Spain for $20 million. The first clashes between Filipinos and US troops occurred in February 1899. A number of American writers and politicians who convened in Chicago for the so-called Anti-Imperialist Congress in the same year protested against the American crackdown in the Philippines and Cuba. In the aftermath of the aforementioned congress, Blumentritt turned his criticism against the imperialist policy of the United States, which he sharply articulated in his article Uncle Sam in the Philippines.19

Partial preserved is another Blumentritt’s work: a voluminous manuscript (over 500 double sheets) with the working title America, whose central theme is the effort to trace the connection between capitalism and Catholicism. He describes the interconnection of the Church with the richest social classes and politics as the “cancer of the state and social life in the United States”. In 1911, Blumentritt began publishing in the Hong Kong magazine The Philippine Republic, published by a group of Filipino emigrants headed by Vicente Sotto, with whom he actively communicated. Until the end of his life, Blumentritt was interested in the socialist movement in the Philippines and corresponded with Isabel de los Reyes, who was the founder of the first Philippine workers’ organization Unión Obrera Democrática. Blumentritt died on September 20, 1913. His last article was published in Hong Kong after his death under the title His Last Words.

Conclusion

The leader of the Sakdal uprising on the Philippine island of Luzon – Salud Algabre – stated in her famous statement of 1935: “We did what we ourselves (Filipino working people) had decided upon—as free people, and power resides in the people. What we did was our heritage…We decided to rebel, to rise up and strike down the sources of power. I said, ‘We are Sakdals! We want immediate, complete, and absolute independence.’…No uprising fails. Each one is a step in the right direction.”20

Neither José Rizal nor Ferdinand Blumentritt were direct actors of the revolutionary events, yet their ideas and actions inspired both the emergence of the revolutionary Katipunan and the Sakdalist movement. Their work has become that “step in the right direction”. Blumentritt, through his ability to be aware of his own mistakes and to listen, has gone from the time of a conventional ethnologist to a socially minded critic of imperialism and colonialism. His work can thus be a testament to human ability to overcome the boundaries of cultures, prejudice or (now refuted) the concept of race, despite the fact that he has never visited his country of interest – the Philippines.
I would like to end this text with a statement by José Rizal, who sums up his thinking and work most aptly: “... races exist only for anthropologists, for the observer of national life only social classes exist.”

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